ANALYSIS

LDC Graduation

Challenges and opportunities for EU–African trade

October 2026

Summary

A striking number of low-income countries have achieved significant poverty-reduction in recent decades and are advancing toward or achieving graduation from the UN's Least Developed Country (LDC) category. In Africa, Senegal is scheduled to graduate in 2029; Comoros and Djibouti meet the criteria, and Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda have taken first steps. Graduation is a development milestone but also brings trade challenges, mainly the loss of LDC-only tariff preferences in many markets. Effects on countries vary, depending on what goods are exported and to which markets. Furthermore, even though most World Trade Organization commitments remain unchanged after graduation, some LDC-specific allowances (e.g., on export subsidies and TRIPS transitions) and certain funds phase out. This analysis focuses on trade effects of LDC graduation in Africa, with a particular focus on changes in the trade relationship with the EU.

For graduating countries, preferential tariffs may still be available in some economies, for example the EU's GSP system, but benefits will be lower than those afforded to LDCs. Free trade agreements with the EU and others can secure continued tariff free market access. For remaining LDCs, the vast majority concentrated in Africa, graduation elsewhere can open market opportunities but also intensify competition and redirect trade.

Recommended actions for the EU and other trade and development partners are to support transition into new preferential market access schemes, such as EUs GSP+, to offer asymmetrical development-oriented free trade agreements, to assist with WTO obligation shifts and provide aid-for-trade to both LDCs and graduating LDC.

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1 Introduction

A striking number of low-income countries have achieved significant poverty-reduction in recent decades. Though challenges remain, more than a dozen states will soon cease to be classified by the UN as 'least developed countries' (LDCs), a process known as 'graduation'.

This is, of course, a cause for celebration, but graduating countries may also face new challenges. Some benefits granted only to LDCs will be lost, particularly in the area of international trade. Many major markets reduce or completely eliminate tariffs on imports from LDCs. LDCs also benefit from certain exemptions in implementing and complying with obligations in the World Trade Organization (WTO). For graduating African countries, these effects may be exacerbated by recent changes to the US trade regime, including both higher general tariffs and the uncertain continuation of the African Growth and Opportunities Act[1] (AGOA).

This analysis focuses on trade effects of LDC graduation in Africa, with a particular focus on changes in the trade relationship with the EU. While the predicted effects of upcoming graduation in Africa are less significant than for several countries in Asia, they still warrant attention. Our analysis will describe the trade aspects of LDC graduation and discuss how negative effects can be mitigated while enhancing positive effects. Specifically, we will address challenges and opportunities for three categories: 1) graduating countries, 2) countries that will remain in the LDC category and 3) partner countries – primarily the EU but also other trading partners that grant benefits to imports from LDCs and can assist both groups through technical assistance and revised trade relations.

[1] Lowered tariffs for imports to the US from countries in Sub-Saharan Africa

2 Graduation – the transition from LDC status

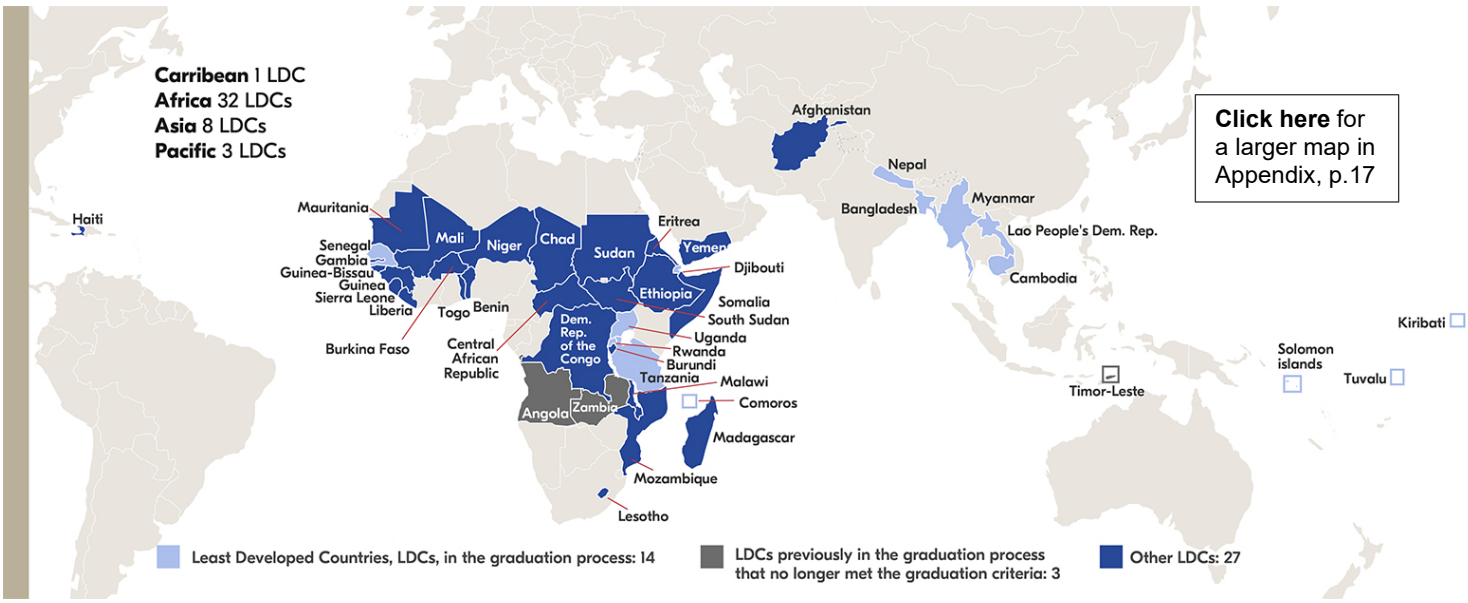
2.1 Big changes await

The UN classifies the world's most vulnerable countries as 'least developed'. The main criteria are low levels of income and human assets, combined with high economic and environmental vulnerability.[2]

In recent decades, the number of LDCs has been relatively constant, with only two countries added to the category (Timor-Leste in 2003 and South Sudan in 2012). Eight countries have been removed as a result of positive development, including Botswana in 1994, Equatorial Guinea in 2017 and Sao Tomé and Principe in 2024. When LDCs leave the category, it is commonly referred to as 'graduating'.

Currently, 44 countries are classified as LDCs. However, in the coming years, a significant shift is expected to take place: six countries are scheduled to graduate from the LDC group, and another eight are on a trajectory to do so. In Africa, Senegal is the only country currently scheduled for graduation (in 2029), while both Comoros and Djibouti have met the formal criteria for graduation.[3] Furthermore, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda have taken the first steps on their journey toward graduation in 2024 by, for the first time, surpassing the development thresholds for LDC classification. If this continues through 2027, these countries will be scheduled for graduation three years later. Angola and Zambia have previously met the criteria once and will hopefully soon do so again.

Figure 1. The 44 countries classified as LDCs and the expected changes



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2 For more detailed information, see LDC Category | Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States

3 Decision on Comoros deferred until 2027, and on Djibouti to a 'later date' by the deciding body, ECOSOC.

It is important to note that countries are recommended for graduation if they perform well in a minimum of two of the three development indices measured. In 2024, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda were below the threshold for income but are still considered to have taken the first step toward graduation. For Senegal, economic and environmental vulnerabilities were still high when the decision for graduation was taken. Along with Comoros and Djibouti, Senegal only met the graduation thresholds for income and human assets in the latest review.

It is also worth noting that a majority of LDCs are currently in Sub-Saharan Africa. Within the foreseeable future, almost all LDCs will likely be concentrated in this region. In Asia, a vast majority of LDCs will graduate, leaving only Afghanistan and Yemen (if Timor-Leste recovers from recent setbacks). Most likely, there will soon be no LDCs remaining in Oceania, while Haiti has been the only LDC in the Western Hemisphere for decades.

2.2 Trade benefits for LDCs

2.2.1 Lower tariffs on exports

The positive development reflected by the number of graduating LDCs is, of course, a cause for celebration. However, when it comes to international trade, countries leaving the category will face certain challenges.

The main challenge is that LDCs are granted preferential access for exports to many markets.[4] Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Switzerland have removed all tariffs on imports from LDCs. The UK and EU grant zero tariffs for the import of all goods, except arms and ammunition. Canada, Chile, China, Japan, Iceland and India are other examples of countries that offer duty-free access for a significant proportion of all goods imported from LDCs. More limited preferences are provided by countries like Armenia, Thailand and Turkey. The equivalent US system was paused in 2021 and has not yet been renewed. Instead, the African Growth and Opportunities Act, which expires in 2025, has provided tariff relief for most countries in sub-Saharan Africa for a wide range of products.

There is no readily available estimate of the aggregate importance of these preferences. UNCTAD concludes that in 2023, the EU, UK, Canada and Japan granted preferential treatment to imports from LDCs valued at USD 41 billion. The main categories were apparel and clothing, machinery, shoes and agricultural products (UNCTAD). According to UNCTAD, the largest tariff concessions are made by the EU. In 2022, thanks to all preferential tariffs, importers saved EUR 6.2 billion on imports from LDCs (European Commission). The majority of these concessions were for imports from LDCs.

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[4] For a full list, see Preferential market access for goods | LDC Portal - International Support Measures for Least Developed Countries

It should be noted that preferential market access is not equally important for all LDCs. The importance depends on what is traded and with whom trade is conducted. If direct exports to markets granting preferences is low, graduation will, of course, have a limited impact. Further, if an LDC mainly exports goods that are already duty free, such as mineral products, preferences will not have a significant impact. If regular tariffs are high, as is often the case for garments and agricultural products, preferences provide a competitive advantage for LDC products. On the other hand, if import tariffs for critical goods are very low, the potential savings from tariff reductions may be outweighed by the administrative costs of applying for preferential treatment and proving origin. If the imported content in a product is too high, it may also be excluded from preferential treatment.

2.2.2 WTO – limited special treatment

Of the 44 current LDCs, 37 are members of the WTO. Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan are in the process of acceding. All African countries close to graduation are members.

There are few benefits of WTO membership that are only offered to LDCs, while many flexibilities apply to all members that define themselves as ‘developing countries’. However, WTO members have agreed to grant LDCs certain benefits, mainly regarding the use of export subsidies and longer transition periods for implementing the agreement on intellectual property rights. Members have also agreed to exercise caution in using the dispute settlement mechanism when resolving disputes with LDCs. Linked to the WTO, there are also funds for trade-related capacity building that support both LDCs and newly graduated LDCs.

3 Effects for graduating countries

3.1 Status quo for (most) WTO commitments

Most aspects of WTO membership will *not* be affected by graduation. For example, there will be no changes in commitments on tariffs, no additional contributions to the budget and no obligation to open up new services sectors to international competition. The main change will be fewer exceptions for the use of export subsidies and intellectual property rights; however, the WTO Secretariat predicts that no retroactive obligations on patents are expected. In addition, a few LDC-specific funds will no longer be available, such as financing for participation in WTO ministerial meetings and support from programmes like the Enhanced Integrated Framework.

3.2 Loss of preferential market access…

As described above, exports from LDCs are often subject to lower tariffs than exports from other countries, making them relatively more competitive. An estimate of the effects for 12 graduating countries in 2022 showed an aggregate loss in exports of over USD 6 billion, corresponding to around 6 per cent of their total exports (Bekkers & Cariola 2024). However, as noted above, the effect on countries depends on what is traded and with whom it is traded. For graduating African countries, the example in Table 1 of preferential access to the EU market shows that the effect varies.

Table 1. Importance of EU market and the utilisation of preferences for African countries on the path to graduation in 2024

	Share of exports to the EU	Eligible for EBA	Degree of utilisation	Duty free imports	Comment
Angola	22%	1%	85%	100%	Mostly duty free mineral products and precious stones, but increasing use of preferences for other products.
Comoros	10%	48%	92%	96%	Mainly vanilla.
Djibouti	22%	82%	54%	61%	Previously low levels of utilisation, but since 2022, increases in exports of textile, garments and shoes.
Rwanda	7%	19%	94%	77%	Mainly clothes and fruits
Senegal	12%	64%	83%	86%	Mainly fish and crustaceans. High level of preference utilisation for agricultural products, notably fruit and vegetables.
Tanzania	9%	31%	95%	99%	Broad utilisation, over 90 % for all categories. Tobacco most important single good.
Uganda	11%	19%	92%	98%	Plants and fish products.
Zambia	2%	40%	80%	92%	Tobacco, agricultural products.

Source: EU Commission GSPhub.eu and National Board of Trade calculations using data from The Observatory of Economic Complexity

The table above illustrates that dependency on the European market varies; for some countries, it is of limited significance. The Indian and Chinese markets are important export destinations for many African LDCs. In 2023, 41 per cent of Angola's exports were destined for China, while 18 per cent of Uganda's exports went to India. Furthermore, 27 per cent of Zambia's exports went to Switzerland (Observatory of Economic Complexity). These countries offer preferential access to LDCs, and terms of trade may be altered after graduation.

For trade in services, the impact of graduation will most likely be very limited, according to WTO estimates (WTO and EIF 2020). The preferential treatment for services that WTO members grant LDCs is fairly limited.

3.3 ... but other options are available …

Graduating countries will still be able to receive some competitive advantage over other exporters through reduced tariffs, though most likely to a lower degree. Even though several trading partners, such as Canada, the UK and the EU, offer tariff reductions for lower-middle income countries, the benefits are lower than those afforded to LDCs. Tariffs may be reduced, but not always to zero. Fewer goods may be covered, and the requirements on national origin are often stricter. The EU offers more favourable market access to countries the World Bank defines as 'lower middle-income', provided they ratify and implement a number of international conventions on human rights, labour rights, environmental and climate protection, and good governance. This scheme is called GSP+. Currently, Cabo Verde is the only African country that takes advantage of this opportunity. According to the European Commission, Rwanda, Senegal, Uganda and Zambia comply with the 27 conventions currently required, while Angola, Comoros, Djibouti and Tanzania have ratified and implemented 25 or 26 out of 27 (European Commission). The current EU GSP expires on 31 December 2026. In a new scheme, the list of international conventions is expanded to 32.

Bilateral and regional trade agreements are another option for maintaining preferential market access. Such agreements ensure a higher level of predictability and stability than other countries' GSP schemes but must be reciprocal to be WTO compliant. For example, since 2019, Comoros has had an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU, which ensures continued duty-free market access after graduation. The EU has entered into comparable trade and development agreements with fourteen African countries: Botswana, Cameroon, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mauritius, Madagascar, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa and Zimbabwe. These agreements open up EU markets fully and immediately, whereas partners open only partially to EU imports, gradually over 15–25 years.

Implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) will also boost regional trade and help build stronger regional value chains. LDCs that sign on to the agreement can benefit from longer tariff reduction periods, so depending on the date of graduation, this may affect national implementation processes for graduating countries.

3.4 …and a soft landing is prepared.

After a decision on graduation by the UN ECOSOC, a three-year transition period follows. LDCs can also apply for additional time to prepare. Once the graduation process is completed, trade preferences may still be extended for a longer period. Many trading partners, such as the EU, Japan and Canada, offer tariff preferences to graduating LDCs for an additional three-year period.

Support for a smooth transition is provided by actors such as the UN, the WTO and the EIF.[5]

3.5 Challenges and opportunities

- Countries may need to assess the aggregate trade effects of graduation in order to prepare. The availability of data will affect the ability to assess the combined effects of losing preferential market access. Further resources may be needed for the analysis of changes and the identification of national interests.
- If trade effects are substantial, for example, in certain sectors, new ways to achieve preferential market access may be considered. Ensuring coverage by the EU GSP+ could be one option. Senegal, for example, could reduce the negative effect on the export of fish and agricultural products to the EU after graduation if exporters had access to GSP+ (European Commission).
- Reciprocal trade agreements are another way forward, such as EPAs with the EU. Market access opportunities for other important markets could also be explored. Specific resources may be required for negotiation and implementation.
- The national impact of altered WTO commitments may need to be addressed, especially on flexibility for export subsidies and intellectual property rights.
- The consequences for the implementation of AfCFTA may need to be considered.

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[5] Examples are Support for LDC graduation | LDC Portal - International Support Measures for Least Developed Countries, WTO | Graduating from status of least-developed country (LDC), LDC graduation | Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF)

4 Effects for remaining LDCs

The expected change in the number of countries classified as LDCs should create new trading opportunities for the remaining countries. Research shows that market openings may be created for exports from remaining LDCs when graduating LDCs lose preferential market access to a number of countries (Bekkers & Cariola). However, remaining LDCs may also face certain challenges if, for example, exports from graduating LDCs are directed to new markets. The net effect is difficult to estimate. For example, clothing accounts for 37 per cent of exports from graduating LDCs to preference-granting countries and for 87 per cent of the predicted total trade loss following graduation. This may offer investment and production opportunities for LDCs that still have access to preferential market access. However, 5 per cent of all global textile exports come from Bangladesh, the country that will be affected the most by loss of preferential market access after graduation. Where will these exports be directed instead? What new production and trading patterns will emerge?

Table 2 shows that the share of exports to the EU varies significantly for this group, along with the degree to which preferential treatment can be applied.

Table 2. Importance of EU market and the utilisation of preferences for non-graduating African LDCs in 2024

	Share of direct exports of goods to the EU	Eligible for preferential treatment	Degree of utilisation	Duty-free imports
Benin	3%	71%	48%	91%
Burkina Faso	2%	23%	92%	98%
Burundi	5%	1%	82%	100%
Central African Republic	19%	5%	0%	94%
Chad	40%	0%	0%	100%
DRC	8%	1%	14%	99%
Eritrea	2%	96%	65%	66%
Ethiopia	20%	50%	89%	92%
Gambia, The	2%	46%	77%	89%
Guinea	3%	1%	52%	100%
Guinea-Bissau	4%	12%	90%	99%
Lesotho	27%	1%	73%	100%
Liberia	28%	2%	88%	100%
Madagascar	29%	71%	48%	91%
Malawi	26%	95%	96%	96%
Mali	1%	21%	59%	91%
Mauritania	14%	61%	93%	96%
Mozambique	18%	67%	79%	88%
Niger	29%	6%	72%	99%
Sierra Leone	16%	4%	73%	99%
Somalia	1%	2%	0%	98%
South Sudan	4%	4%	27%	97%
Sudan	11%	1%	1%	99%
Togo	3%	13%	73%	97%

Source: EU Commission GSPhub.eu and National Board of Trade calculations using data from The Observatory of Economic Complexity

The effects of other countries' graduation, and the ability to exploit potential opportunities, vary significantly between countries. However, some common questions can be posed.

4.1 Challenges and opportunities

- New export opportunities may emerge from the graduation of other LDCs, which could attract new investment and production. What kinds of analyses are needed to understand the new landscape, and what support could policy makers provide to traders?
- Depending on how trade patterns change, competition on export markets may become fiercer. Competition may also change on the national level if import patterns change.
- If the level of utilisation of LDC preferences is low, an understanding of the reasons may be needed. Are there opportunities to increase export competitiveness by increasing the utilisation rate? That is, are low levels due to a lack of information, or to the assessment that administrative costs and uncertainty outweigh the benefits of tariff reductions? Or are products ineligible for preferential imports due to origin requirements?
- If almost all LDCs are concentrated in Africa, there may be consequences for how the special interests of these nations are viewed by the international community, which may need attention from national policymakers.

5 Recommendations for the EU and other trade and development partners

Trading partners need to be aware of upcoming changes, both for graduating and non-graduating LDCs. It is important that partners continue to provide a stable and predictable bilateral and regional trade environment, especially at a time when the WTO can no longer provide the stable global framework it once did. US tariffs on exports from African countries were recently raised by 10–30 per cent, product-specific Section 232 tariffs not included. An expiration of the US African Growth and Opportunities Act would further exacerbate existing challenges for exports to the US. Even when trade seems to be affected to a relatively low extent, for example, if the US market is not a major destination for direct exports, the disruption of regional and global value chains will most likely affect a wide range of exports from African countries. At the same time, new export opportunities may arise if other nations, such as China and India, face even higher US tariffs.

For LDCs and newly graduated LDCs, international trade can be an important engine for growth and contribute to sustainable economic development. When major donors reduce their financing of trade-related development aid, both graduating and non-graduating LDCs are affected. Previously, this so-called 'aid for trade' remained high even during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, with a projected 9 to 17 per cent drop in official development assistance in 2025, it remains to be seen how levels of aid for trade will be affected (OECD 2025). Assistance is needed for graduating countries to adjust to new terms of trade and to avoid setbacks on the path to continued development. Support should also target remaining LDCs so they can exploit opportunities that may arise and to ensure continued progress toward poverty reduction.

5.1 In relation to graduating LDCs:

- Facilitate the transition to new preferential schemes, such as the EU GSP+, through support in ratifying and implementing relevant international conventions.
- Trust, predictability and cooperation in trade relations are key. Therefore, the EU and other partners should make efforts to conclude or implement bilateral and regional trade agreements. Such agreements need to be reciprocal to be WTO compliant, but should be asymmetrical, taking into account partners differing stages of development.
- Support the adjustment of value chains to ensure continued tariff reductions, where new origin requirements may need to be met through more national content in export products.
- Support the fulfilment of altered commitments in WTO agreements.
- Collaborate to improve the utilisation of preferences and ensure compliance with export market requirements, for example, for agricultural products and textiles.

- Consider the question: Could development cooperation support the role of trade policy institutions in the transition? Are there national resources available to analyse changes, identify national interests, prepare for negotiations and implement agreements?

5.2 In relation to remaining LDCs:

- Provide enhanced support to countries in the process of becoming WTO members. Acceding while still remaining in the LDC category can create more favourable conditions when becoming a member.
- Collaborate on identifying new export opportunities and support the production capacity to meet them. In addition, support producers' capacity to comply with export market requirements, for example, for agricultural products and textiles.
- Safeguard LDC preferential market access.
- Ensure that international attention and support for LDCs remains a high priority in a global context, both for trade rules and aid for trade.

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Sammanfattning på svenska

Summary in Swedish

Minskad fattigdom i många låginkomstländer gör att ett historiskt stort antal länder är på väg att lämna FN:s kategori ”minst utvecklade länder” (MUL). Denna så kallade ”graduering” är förstås något positivt, men den innebär vissa utmaningar när det gäller internationell handel. Den här analysen fokuserar på handelseffekter av MUL-graduering i Afrika, med särskilt fokus på hur handelsrelationen med EU förändras.

FN bedömer MUL-status utifrån tre kriterier: inkomst, humanitära resurser och grad av ekonomisk och miljömässig sårbarhet. I dag finns 44 MUL-länder men minst 14 är efter en längre tids positiv utveckling glädjande nog på väg att lämna kategorin. I Afrika gäller det Senegal, Komorerna, Djibouti, Rwanda, Tanzania och Uganda, och på längre sikt möjligen Angola och Zambia. Eftersom nästan samtliga MUL i andra världsdelar graduerar kommer att den absoluta majoriteten av MUL snart att finnas i Afrika söder om Sahara. MUL ges låga eller helt borttagna tullar av många ekonomier, såsom EU, UK, Japan, Indien och Kina. Värdet av dessa tullförmåner uppskattas till drygt 40 miljarder USD per år. Graduering innebär att de förmånliga handelsvillkoren gradvis försvinner.

WTO-medlemskap påverkas däremot i liten grad av graduering, med undantag för minskad flexibilitet kring exportsubventioner och immaterialrätt.

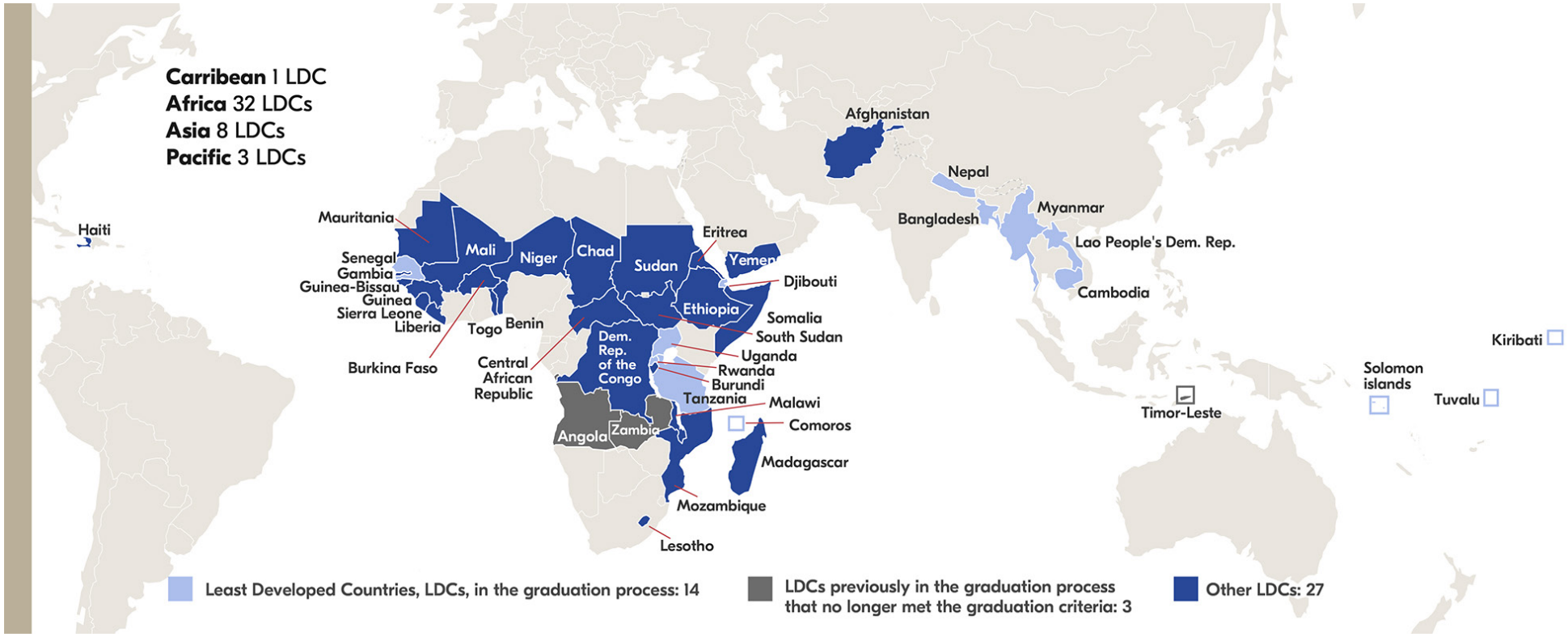
Effekten för MUL som graduerar varierar beroende på exportstruktur: länder som främst exporterar mineraler påverkas mindre, eftersom tullar på de varorna ofta är väldigt låga. Länder med stor andel jordbruks- och textilprodukter i sin export riskerar större tapp. Hur stor andel av exporten som går till länder som ger tullättnader för MUL spelar förstås också in i hur stor effekten blir. Andra preferenssystem kan ta vid, men de är ofta mindre förmånliga. För att mildra effekterna av graduering kan länder ansluta sig till EU:s GSP+, som ger lägre tullar mot att vissa internationella konventioner följs, eller sluta bilaterala handelsavtal med handelspartners, som exempelvis ekonomiska partnerskapsavtal (EPA) med EU.

När vissa länder lämnar MUL-gruppen kan nya exportmöjligheter öppnas för de som stannar kvar, till exempel inom textilier där konkurrensen från tullfri export från Bangladesh till många länder kan minska. Samtidigt kan handelsmönster skifta och öka konkurrensen på andra marknader.

EU och andra handelspartner bör stödja en smidig övergång genom att underlätta inträde i så förmånliga preferenssystem som möjligt, exempelvis EU:s GSP+. Partner bör också främja bilaterala och regionala avtal samt bistå med analys- och förhandlingskapacitet. Det är viktigt att fortsatt prioritera MUL-frågor globalt, bibehålla tullfri marknadstillgång för kvarvarande MUL och stärka handel som motor för hållbar utveckling. Även handelsrelaterat bistånd bör upprätthållas, för att både graduerande och kvarvarande MUL-länder ska kunna anpassa sig till nya handelsvillkor.

Appendix

Figure 1. The 44 countries classified as LDCs and the expected changes
(The map from chapter 2.1, p.5)



The National Board of Trade Sweden is the government agency for international trade, the EU internal market and trade policy. Our mission is to facilitate free and open trade with transparent rules as well as free movement in the EU internal market.

Our goal is a well-functioning internal market, an external EU trade policy based on free trade and an open and strong multilateral trading system.

We provide the Swedish Government with analyses, reports and policy recommendations. We also participate in international meetings and negotiations.

The National Board of Trade, via SOLVIT, helps businesses and citizens encountering obstacles to free movement. We also host several networks with business organisations and authorities which aim to facilitate trade.

As an expert agency in trade policy issues, we also provide assistance to developing countries through trade-related development cooperation. One example is Open Trade Gate Sweden, a one-stop information centre assisting exporters from developing countries in their trade with Sweden and the EU.

Our analyses and reports aim to increase the knowledge on the importance of trade for the international economy and for the global sustainable development. Publications issued by the National Board of Trade only reflect the views of the Board.

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